



The Roman Empire in context

Historical and Comparative Perspectives

Edited by Johann P. Arnason
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The Legs of the Throne: Kings, Elites, and Subjects in Sasanian Iran

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[If there is someone who] would be [more righteous and] better and more pious [than your Majesty?], (then) he shall assume the rulership. The Landholders and the Princes and the Grandees and the Nobles, the Persians [and the Parthians will then be more distinguished and ?] the well-doer of the gods will then reach higher and Eranshahr will then stay healthier and more protected ... but we know [that] there is not (?). Your Majesty is the greatest and the best, and the rulership suits (You) (?) and is most becoming for Your Majesty. [It is fitting for?] Your Majesty [that you should ascend ?] the throne which the gods gave [and (that)] You should be [...] and should keep and govern the realm until the time of the Renovation and be happy by Your Own glory and realm.

(Inscription of King Narseh at Paikuli, c.293 CE: NPi 77–78, 88; Humbach and Skjærvø 1978–83: 3.64–5, 69)¹

The Christian servants and subjects of his Majesty [Hormizd IV]; also, all, in a sincere spirit without ruse or malice, respectful and indebted to his Majesty, we pray to God for him night and day, for his power to endure forever, for He who inhabits the heavens, the Lord of kings, to be with him in everything forever, according to the will of the Lord.

(*Synodicon Orientale*, Preface to the Synod of Isho'yahbh I, 585 CE: Chabot 1902: 131; Morony 1984a: 337)

Sasanian Iran (c.220–651 CE) was the last great empire of the Ancient Near East. Under the Sasanians, the Iranian polity was a preeminent sociopolitical institution in Southwest Asia, rivaled only by its primary foe, the Mediterranean-centered empire

of the Romans. Yet the social and political institutions of Sasanian Iran remain frustratingly little known, especially compared with those of their Roman neighbors.²

For over four centuries, members of the ethnically Persian Sasanian family ruled as “Kings of Kings” over an empire of vast topographic and demographic diversity. Referring to their possessions as the lands of *Eran ud Aneran* (Aryans and non-Aryans) or, more simply, as *Eranshahr* (The land of the Aryans/Iranians), the Sasanians developed a complex and mutable collective identity for themselves and their polity. At various times, and to distinct audiences, the Sasanian monarch was, like King Narseh (293–302) in his inscription at Paikuli, a righteous defender of the Iranian gods, the traditions of the ancestors, and the rights of Iranian (Persian and Parthian) aristocrats, or, like King Hormizd IV (579–90), a protector of the Christian Church and an instrument of the Christian God’s will.³

However, social and military exigencies of the Sasanians’ ascension to the monarchy and the evolving demographic complexities of their empire stood in perpetual tension with the Sasanians’ dreams of an orderly and centralized *Eranshahr*, unified under their rule. The Sasanian kings’ cooperation, competition, and conflict with those Iranian (especially Parthian) aristocracies responsible for their rise to power dictated significant political compromises in exchange for these elites’ spiritual and military legitimation. Simultaneously, Sasanian efforts to integrate and exploit the resources of their vast and wealthy lowlands led to friction with Jewish and Christian populations there. The eventual negotiation of a tenuous regime of tolerance for these “non-Iranian” communities, and the integration of their elites into Sasanian administrative structures, threatened the essential alliance between Iranian monarchs, aristocrats, and priests. Finally, and ironically, conquest and competition with foreign powers, especially the Roman Empire, placed further strain on the institutions of the Sasanian polity, while being at the same time essential to its monarchs’ own self-definition as conquerors for, and protectors of, *Eranshahr*.

This chapter will survey these developments in Sasanian Iran with an eye to shedding light on the social and institutional development of the Roman Empire. While Sasanian Iran was undeniably less populous, economically developed, and administratively integrated than its Roman neighbor, the two polities simultaneously confronted challenges of distance, diversity, and demographic transformation. While Roman authors frequently reflected on the military and administrative affinities between the two “superpowers” of the late-ancient world, enhanced by their frequent mutual borrowings from each other, the Sasanians’ novel response to ethnic and confessional diversity would be their polity’s enduring legacy.

The Sasanian World: Distance and Diversity

The ethnolinguistic, cultural, and confessional diversity of Sasanian Iran was a consequence of the vast territorial ambitions of the Sasanian kings. The Sasanian frontier cities of Nisibis (now on the border of Syria and Turkey) and Merv (now

in Central Turkmenistan) were separated by over 1,800 km travel overland. Over their four centuries of rule, the Sasanians established and maintained direct or indirect control over the Tigris-Euphrates floodplain, the Iranian plateau, large portions of the Caucasus Mountains, Central Asia (what is now Turkmenistan) and the southern coast of the Persian Gulf. Roughly speaking, the Sasanian territories were divided into two geographically and ecologically distinct regions, one in the south and west, the other in the north and east, divided from each other by mountains and surrounded by peripheral steppelands and deserts.⁴

The first of these regions encompassed the floodplains and river valleys of the Tigris, Euphrates, and the Karun rivers, and, peripherally, the islands and coastline of the Persian/Iranian gulf.⁵ In Sasanian times, these lowlands corresponded to the provinces of Arbayestan (Mesopotamia) on the Upper Euphrates, Hedayab (Adiabene) between the Greater and Lesser Zab rivers, Garmakan south of the Lesser Zab, Asorestan (Babylonia) between the Tigris and Euphrates, Mayshan (Messene) near the Gulf outlet of the Tigris and Euphrates, Khuzestan (Elamais) on the floodplain of the river Karun, along with the Arabian coast and the islands of the Gulf. These regions were characterized by their rich soil and relatively abundant water supply, making the lowlands as a whole one of the most densely populated and agriculturally rich areas in the ancient world. The lowlands were, however, largely devoid of other strategic resources (such as timber, metals, or precious stones) and alarmingly free of natural impediments to invasion. Moreover, unlike the Nile valley, the agricultural wealth of these regions was only unlocked through the constant toil of their inhabitants. The people of the floodplains fought an unending struggle against an environment that could, one day, divert a river miles away from their fields, carry off crops in a wall of water, or simply poison the fields with salt over decades. These perils motivated a centuries-long, large-scale human transformation of the landscape through the construction of dams, diversions, and canals.⁶ The collaborative effort involved in the construction and maintenance of these projects, in the distribution of the agricultural wealth they created, and in the importation of necessary resources, inspired the development of complex bureaucratic polities at the city-state level or above from the fourth millennium BCE onwards. In essence, administrative centralization and bureaucratic organization were necessary preconditions for the effective exploitation of the vast potential wealth of the lowlands region (Morony 1991b).

The second region of the Sasanian world encompassed the uplands of the Iranian plateau and the Caucasus mountains. At its center were the provinces of Pars (Persis), Mah (Media), and Parthia, forming a rough arc encircling the arid, and largely uninhabited central regions of the Iranian plateau.⁷ On its periphery lay the provinces of Azerbaijan and Armenia in the west and Aparshahr and Merv in the east (Khurasan in the Islamic era). These uplands were far less fertile than the floodplains to the west and south, but were more diverse in their mix of natural resources. In general, pastoralism played a far larger role in the agricultural mix of this region, although croplands were scattered throughout, watered by rainfall or

through the diversion of upland springs into underground aqueducts (*qanats*). While there was significant settlement throughout the uplands, these populations were largely confined to fertile valleys divided by hostile terrain. Consequently, social organization in the highlands tended to decentralization over the long term. In particular, highly militarized aristocratic clans, led by a few “grandees” or “great families” (Middle Persian: *vuzurgan*), played a dominant role throughout this region (Pourshariati 2008: 27–30). These clans were occasionally united under a shared monarch, particularly when collective defense against outsiders became an essential concern, or in the interests of raiding and conquest. Indeed, from the Achaemenid period or earlier, these kings repeatedly exploited the military potential of their homelands to conquer and rule the wealthy floodplains to the west. However, placating both the military powers of the highlands and economic powerhouses of the plains was a constant balancing act for any king and dynasty, especially the Sasanians.

Although the Near Eastern lowlands and highlands were often bound together in the same polities, the two core regions of the Sasanian world remained economically and culturally quite distinct. Life on the fertile plains was largely sedentary and agrarian, with towns and cities serving as focal points for an elaborate barter and monetary economy.⁸ The drivers of the regional economy were monarchs, temples, and other large collective landholders, and, in favorable political climates, merchants. By contrast, upland societies were organized in a less complicated manner around these regions’ aristocratic clans. The economic life of the uplands is less well documented; however, flocks and herds formed the basic components of wealth for the aristocracies of the region, supplemented by resource extraction, subsistence agriculture, and, significantly for the Sasanian polity, economic predation on the lowlands or points beyond. Unfortunately, few systematic studies of the social and economic structures of late Ancient Iran have been attempted, although recent examinations of Armenian and Iranian aristocracies (Garsoïan 1976, 1982; Gyselen 2008; Pourshariati 2008) and studies of the literary and material cultures of Sasanian Mesopotamia may point the way for future research.⁹

The socioeconomic distinctions of these regions were mirrored in its ethnolinguistic divisions. As noted before, the territories controlled by the Sasanian polity were home to an enormously diverse population. To their contemporaries, the Sasanians were kings of the Persians, referring to the ruling family’s origins among the aristocracy of Pars. However, in their inscriptions, the Sasanians introduced a more sophisticated ethnolinguistic calculus, dubbing speakers of other Indo-European languages (including Parthians) “Aryans” (Iranians) and “free men” like themselves (Gnoli 1987, 1989; Shaked 2008). Indeed, at various times the Sasanians even extended this Aryan category to encompass Armenians for cultural, linguistic, political, and religious reasons (Łazar P’arpec’i: 42–3, 48; Garsoïan 1976: 193–6; Russell 1987). However, much of the population of the Sasanian empire was non-Iranian in language and subject to Sasanian rule: predominantly the Semitic-speaking peoples of the Tigris-Euphrates floodplain, Aramaeans – that is, speakers of Aramaic dialects – and Arabs, but also Greek-speakers, Huns, Turks,

Indians, and others (Morony 1984a). This diversity posed a significant ideological challenge to later Sasanian efforts to unite all of their subjects in an *Eranshahr* ("Land of the Aryans/Iranians") that was defined purely by loyalty to the Sasanian monarchy.

Beyond ethnic categorization, classification based on confession also became increasingly important to personal and public identity through the Sasanian period, although religion's significance may be exaggerated in literary sources and modern studies based on them (Morony 1984a; Payne 2009). In official inscriptions, the first Sasanian kings identified themselves as "Mazda-worshippers," although this should not be taken as a sign that they practiced a recognizably modern, dualist form of Zoroastrianism, or that they worshiped Mazda (Ahura Mazda/Ohrmazd) alone (Kreyenbroek 2008). Nonetheless, "Magianism" (after the Iranian term for "priest," *mog*, the Greek *magos*) as it was practiced, played a significant role in the construction of "Iranian" identity and in the culture of the Iranian plateau, where priesthoods were hereditary offices within aristocratic families (Morony 1984a: 291–7).

Yet, while politically influential, if not dominant, Magians formed only one ingredient of the religious mixture of Sasanian Iran. An inscription of the Magian *Ohrmazd-Magupat* ("Chief-Priest of Ohrmazd") Kirdir from the later third century CE gives some idea of the religious diversity of the Sasanian lands. Here Kirdir describes his humbling of "Jews (*yahud*), Buddhists (*shaman*), Hindus (*brahman*), Nazarenes (*nasara*), Christians (*kristiyan*), Baptist Gnostics (*makdag*), and Manichaeans (*zandik*)," and his destruction of idolatrous temples, presumably of "traditional" pagans whose conventions formed the essential substratum of the religious and magical practices of the region (KKZ 11). This picture was considerably complicated by the changing religious demography of the region, especially the inexorable spread of proselytizing faiths like Buddhism, Manichaeism, and especially Christianity (Chaumont 1988; Baum and Winkler 2003: 7–41).

The social diversity of Sasanian Iran engendered a dynamic cultural environment. In their administration and public imagery, Sasanian kings fused the traditions of over 3,000 years of urban, imperial civilization in the Fertile Crescent with the Hellenistic culture disseminated by Alexander and his successors throughout the Mediterranean and West Asia. Indeed, the great syncretistic world religion of Manichaeism developed under the auspices of early Sasanian rule.¹⁰ The *Babylonian Talmud*, assembled and edited after the fifth century, collected the wisdom of Jewish sages living under Sasanian rule (Goodblatt 1979a; Kalmin 2006). Neoplatonic philosophers expelled from the Academy in Athens by the Christian Roman Emperor Justinian I found a new home at the court of Khusrō I (Walker 2006: 164–205). Iran also provided a refuge for "Nestorian" and anti-Chalcedonian Christian leaders driven from the west by Roman state policy (Becker 2006). Indeed, by the sixth century, Christian intellectuals composed theological treatises while simultaneously advising Sasanian kings and governors (Morony 1984a: 332–41). This cultural and religious pluralism, while hardly chosen by the Sasanians,

stands as a contrast to the imposed religious and intellectual orthodoxy presided over by the Christian emperors of Rome and Byzantium.

These Roman rulers and their subjects viewed the Sasanians as the primary military, political, economic, and cultural challenge to their empire.¹¹ Sasanian Iran was the great “other” in the Roman conceptualization of the universe, the only enemy worthy of respect, the sole point of comparison for Roman imperial majesty, and the final legitimate challenge to Roman hegemony over the entire universe (Fowden 1993: 12–36). The pressures of competition shaped the institutional development of both regimes on a fundamental level. Indeed, the constant (albeit often imaginary) threat of “the other” was a central justification for centralized imperial, bureaucratic rule in both polities.

Despite a certain level of hyperbole in Roman depictions of the Sasanian “other” and the propaganda of the Sasanians themselves, Sasanian Iran was the only nearby polity comparable to the Late Roman Empire in terms of its demographics, urbanization, political organization, wealth, military strength, and diplomatic sophistication (Howard-Johnston 1995). Roman authors, including Ammianus Marcellinus, Procopius, Agathias, Menander Protector, and ps.-Maurice, repeatedly recognized this, regarding the Sasanians with a mixture of respect and revulsion (Cameron 1969; Dodgeon and Lieu 2000; Greatrex and Lieu 2002). Indeed, some Roman observers even saw parallels between Roman and Iranian administrative offices, occasionally portraying Sasanian Iran as a sort of a “primitive” Roman Empire, preserving “barbarous” practices and heresy, but possessed of a purity and vitality lost in the Roman world (McDonough forthcoming).

The Sasanian “Revolution”?

Yet, when Ardashir I (224–42) assumed the title “King of Kings” on the battlefield of Hormizdagan (April 28, 224), he overthrew a Parthian Arsacid polity that had been repeatedly humbled and humiliated by its Roman neighbors.¹² Inheriting an empire with a complicated geographic and ethnic makeup, a long and knotty string of Near Eastern administrative and ideological traditions accumulated over three millennia of literate urban civilization, and the immediate legacy of decentralized rule of the Arsacid family, Ardashir and the Sasanians faced an uphill struggle to establish a rough parity with Roman power.

Ardashir’s immediate predecessors, the Arsacid “Great Kings,” presided over a highly decentralized mix of client kingdoms, as well as Mesopotamian and Hellenistic-style city and temple states, a political state of affairs that prevailed in the region from the time of Alexander the Great.¹³ These diverse polities had maintained their own regional courts and hierarchies, managed their internal affairs and occasionally even conducted their own foreign policies, especially when supported by Roman wealth, arms, or intimidation. Indeed, the title “King of Kings,” adopted by the late Arsacids, was both a statement of political supremacy, and a tacit acknowledgment of Arsacid royal weakness when faced with their unruly

client kingdoms (Wolski 1988). Moreover, Arsacid ambitions were both advanced and hobbled by other powerful “Great Families” (*vuzurgan*) on the Iranian Plateau and in the Caucasus, who supplied much of their military manpower (Wiesehöfer 1996: 138–41). However, the “Great Families” could be fickle in their allegiance to their sovereign, whom they regarded as an equal (Chaumont 1966; Pourshariati 2008: 24–7). In the midst of these political circumstances, the power of the Arsacid “King of Kings” was nominal, at best.

In the first two decades of the third century, endemic division among the Arsacids, including civil war between rival contenders for the Arsacid monarchy, and repeated Roman interference in the weakened Parthian kingdom formed the immediate backdrop to the Sasanian takeover (Bivar 1983: 92–7). In their revolt, the Sasanians exploited the fractious nature of the Arsacid polity, its client kings’ discontent with Arsacid rule, and the ambitions of the other, non-Arsacid, Parthian aristocratic families (Widengren 1971). While undermining the Arsacids diplomatically and militarily, the Sasanians developed the basic principles of their new polity: a new ideology of ethnic, religious, and political unity, increased administrative centralization, techniques of “divide and rule,” and an aggressive military posture against foreign enemies.

The origins of the Sasanian family are obscure and have been further complicated by the profusion of dynastic myth-making in late Sasanian works like the *Karnamag-i Ardashir Papakan* and the *Letter of Tansar* (Boyce 1968; Widengren 1971). The earliest elements of Sasanian political ideology apparently developed under Ardashir’s father and brother, the regional rulers of Pars: Papak and Shapur. Through their hereditary inheritance of the guardianship of the great temple of the goddess Anahita at Estakhr in Pars, the first Sasanians coupled spiritual and temporal power.¹⁴ Their military unification of Pars demonstrated and made manifest the family’s divine destiny, in the sense that their piety and martial strength established their right to rule Pars and beyond. These ideas laid the ideological foundations for their revolution against Arsacid authority and their subsequent restructuring of sociopolitical institutions of the Near East (Widengren 1959; Choksy 1988).

Early Sasanian art and epigraphy give some insight into the public messages promulgated by the Sasanian monarchy and its supporters.¹⁵ The bulk of known early Sasanian royal inscriptions and rock-cut relief sculptures survive on the Iranian plateau, particularly in Sasanian Pars and Mad.¹⁶ Their existence there may be a simple accident of survival, but it does appear that the primary audience for these images and texts was the population of the plateau region. Nevertheless, while they present an early snapshot of the Sasanians’ appeals to their Iranian aristocratic peers, these appeals were reformulated as their empire expanded to encompass wider geographic and cultural horizons. Indeed, these royal inscriptions are bi- or trilingual, inscribed in Middle Persian, Parthian, and, in some early cases, Greek, suggesting their desire for a broad audience for their ideological claims (Rubin 2002).

The early Sasanian conceptualization of the role of the “King of Kings” was neatly summed up by Shapur I’s inscription at Naqsh-e Rostam, in which he declares himself, “The Mazda-worshipping lord/god Shapur, King of Kings of Iran and

Non-Iran, beloved of the gods" (ShKZ 1). In early Sasanian royal ideology the ruler was a divine conqueror, a slayer of unjust rulers, the protector of the Aryan people and *Eranshahr* from evil foreigners and wild beasts, the chosen of the gods and the one true "King of Kings" (Widengren 1959; Frye 1964; Choksy 1988).

Correspondingly, the first Sasanian kings portrayed themselves in sculpture as military victors and as the chosen representatives and servants of the gods, especially Ohrmazd, Anahita, and Verethragna. Early carvings show the kings humbling their enemies in battle: the unhorsing of the Arsacid Artavan V at Firuzabad; or, as at Naqsh-e Rostam and Bishapur, they present images of Roman emperors captured (Valerian), kneeling before the king (Philip the Arab), or trampled under his horse (Gordian III). Other carvings at Naqsh-e Rostam and Taq-e Bustan show standing monarchs receiving the *khwarrah*, or "royal glory" from divine figures, flanked by mortal and immortal attendants. Increasingly elaborate crowns featuring divine symbols of animal heads, wings, stars, and crescent moons further linked the monarch to his choice of divinities (Gnoli 1999; Choksy 1989). Indeed, in a bit of metaphor made real, the crowns of the last Sasanian kings threatened to literally crush their wearers under the sheer physical weight of all of their accumulated divine symbols (Ettinghausen 1972: 28–9). Alongside these reliefs, inscriptions describe in lurid detail regions subjugated, prisoners deported, and, significantly, fires to the gods established by the Sasanian kings.

Ardashir's defeat of Artavan V in single combat served as a potent symbol of the new King of Kings' military prowess and further evidence of the favor of the gods (Widengren 1971). Thus, continued military aggression was central to the activities of Ardashir I and his successors. Initially, Ardashir I and his son, the future Shapur I launched military campaigns resulting in the subjugation of the remaining Arsacid vassals (Chaumont 1975). By the 230s, Ardashir's consolidation of the former Arsacid dominions was, with the notable exceptions of Armenia and Hatra, largely complete, and the new King of Kings turned his attentions to military campaigning against the Roman Empire. Through their aggressive stance, the Sasanians repudiated the perennial weakness of their Arsacid predecessors, attempted to reclaim the mantle of the Achaemenid Persian "Great Kings" of the past, and directly challenged the pretensions of the would-be "new Alexanders" of Rome's Severan dynasty (Shayegan 2004). Indeed, Ardashir's successor, Shapur I, sacked Antioch (260), the third city of the Roman Empire and occasional imperial capital, deporting its inhabitants to a newly founded city dubbed Veh-Antiyok-Shapur ("The Better Antioch of Shapur"; Kettenhofen 1996b; Morony 2004b). In recognition of his conquests, Shapur and his successors claimed kingship over both "Iran and Non-Iran."

Through constant campaigning against Rome and to the East, the Sasanians consolidated their grip on the Arsacid dominions, secured the loyalties of former Arsacid vassals through intimidation and the allegiance of the Parthian great families through the promise of military spoils, establishing themselves as serious competitors to Rome in the rhetoric of universal dominion. Indeed, the sixth-century historian Petrus Patricius (fr. 13; Dodgeon and Lieu 2000: 131–2) "quotes" the Sasanian

king Narseh addressing the Roman emperor Diocletian as “brother” and declaring Rome and Iran the “Two Eyes of the World.” Sasanian competition against Rome, driven by royal ideology, played a primary role in shaping Sasanian administration over the centuries. Nevertheless, despite dramatic victories, the Sasanians lacked a truly “professional” military and were only rarely able to sustain extended military efforts against Rome.

Beyond the military campaigns of Ardashir and his successors, the most immediate impact of the Sasanian ascendancy was the higher profile of Iranian Magianism, its priesthood, and its temples (Tafazzoli 1988; Shaked 1990). Victorious kings made enormous sacrificial dedications to their home temple of Anahita at Estakhr, including the severed heads of their foes, up at least through the reign of Shapur II (309–79 CE) (al-Tabari *Ta'rikh*: 1.819; Nöldeke 1879: 4n. 2, 17). The Sasanians conspicuously founded royal temple fires to the gods throughout their territories and provided them with lavish endowments. Indeed, from the reign of Ardashir I through to the end of the dynasty, a fire altar (initially depicted on a throne), was the reverse image featured on most Sasanian coinage (Malek 1993; Alram 1999; Alram and Gyselen 2003–). These temples remained foci of royal patronage through the end of the dynasty, and incorporated royal residences and administrative complexes, as at Adur Gushnasp. Indeed, throughout the Sasanian period Magian priests (notably the *mobedan* and *herbedan*) played a central role in civil administrative practice as aristocratic, literate, and mobile state officials (Gignoux 1980, 1982, 1984a, 1986; Shaked 1990). Additionally, the legal apparatus of the state was almost entirely relegated to Magian priests (Perikhanian 1997; Macuch 1997). Indeed, the ubiquitous presence of the Magian priesthood may perhaps be best illustrated by the gradual tempering of early Sasanian royal claims to personal divinity and divine descent, in favor of royal names and titles taken from the Magian holy texts, the *Avesta* (Morony 1997: 75; Daryaei 1995).

Eranshahr and its King of Kings

The rise of the Sasanians was rapid, yet their dynasty proved surprisingly secure in power, particularly when weighed against the perpetual problems of dynastic succession faced by Roman contemporaries. However, the subjects of the Sasanians were not passive observers and the Sasanian monarchy's religio-political claims were not made in a vacuum. Indeed, the practices of the Sasanian kings must be viewed against the backdrop of the territorial, cultural, and linguistic divisions within their dominions. While the Sasanians tamed many of the decentralizing trends that tore the Arsacid polity asunder, they also empowered a variety of new social and political actors in Southwest Asia.

Initially, it was the support of the high nobility of the Iranian plateau, the mostly Parthian “great families” (*vuzurgan*), that enabled the rise of the Sasanian monarchy. Indeed, the peace of the realm rested largely on long-term coincidence

of interests between the Sasanian kings and the largely Parthian aristocracy (Pourshariati 2008). Aristocratic cavalry formed the backbone of the Sasanian armies while Iranian priests and aristocrats provided the bureaucratic manpower needed to marshal the diverse kingdoms, tribes, city- and temple-states, and royal lands of their territories into a coherent whole.

Mirroring social divisions in other premodern societies, Iranian societies recognized an essential division between a military nobility (*azatan*: “the free”) and subject populations. The social status of these “free men” was based on their ability to provide at least one cavalryman (and probably some number of conscripted infantry retainers) for the great families (*vuzurgan*), in a system described anachronistically by modern scholars as “feudal.”¹⁷ In this manner, the *vuzurgan* recruited and commanded the bulk of Sasanian cavalry, forming the core of the kings’ offensive forces and providing their most skilled soldiers and engineers. The Sasanians did not possess a standing army, with the exception of the royal bodyguard and auxiliaries drawn from the peoples of its frontiers (Shahbazi 1987). Thus, early Sasanian military successes were founded on the active consent of these *vuzurgan*, and their changing allegiances could make or break a would-be monarch, as in the case of the king Narseh’s accession to the throne, described in his Paikuli inscription. While the military interests of the *vuzurgan* largely aligned with those of their Sasanian kings, this alliance of “equals” was ultimately unsettling for any king.

In exchange for their support, these aristocrats expected the King of Kings to honor the gods, to lead their cavalry to victory, glory, and wealth, and to leave the *vuzurgan* the freedom to administer their vast upland estates as they wished. Sasanian kings who failed in any of these duties quickly found themselves targets of assassination or revolt. Indeed, a succession of Sasanian kings beginning in the late fourth century met a series of bizarre and gruesome ends, culminating in the suspicious death of Yazdgard I (399–421), kicked to death by a divinely-sent horse (Shahbazi 2003). In his 21 years on the throne, Yazdgard I earned the epithet, “the sinner,” for his hostility to the traditional royal accommodations with the Iranian aristocracies. Yazdgard’s replacement by his son Bahram V (421–38), a warrior and hunter portrayed in aristocratic literary tradition as an ideal king, clearly demonstrated the aristocracy’s influence on the Sasanian monarchy (al-Tabari *Ta’rikh*: 1.854–71; Nöldeke 1879: 85–112).

Faced with the independence of the *vuzurgan*, many developments in Sasanian administration should be recognized as attempts to subvert the vast power of these Parthian “great families.” The Sasanians sought to centralize authority through bureaucratization, cultivating and exploiting new sources of manpower and wealth and empowering elites with power bases independent of the Parthian aristocracy. These efforts were only marginally successful, as the Parthian aristocracy continued to play a central role in the Sasanian polity’s internal affairs up to and after its disintegration in the seventh century (Pourshariati 2008). Nevertheless, Sasanian competition with the Parthian aristocratic clans left significant legacies in Sasanian royal ideology, administrative practice, and social norms.

From the beginning, Sasanian kings cultivated power outside of the Iranian heartland, gradually transforming conquered or allied client kingdoms into the domains of Sasanian princes (Chaumont 1975). Indeed, the regimes of the first Sasanians might best be seen as examples of “household rule,” through the extensive and active participation of queens and royal princes of the Sasanian family in administration and the ideology of divine kingship. Jamsheed Choksy’s study of the coinage of Bahram II (276–93) has notably explored the role of the king’s family in early Sasanian iconography and epigraphy, although relatively little attention has been paid to the role of the entire Sasanian family as a governing unit (Choksy 1989; Rose 1999). The appointment of Sasanian princes as “kings” of militarily vital regions such as Armenia, Sakastan, or “the East” served to integrate these regions under the rule of the Sasanian family. “Household rule” also provided princes with power bases from which to negotiate their eventual succession. However, the problematic implications of this practice can be seen in various revolts of Sasanian princes against their “King of Kings,” most notably the successful rebellion by the “Great King of Armenia,” Narseh, described in his Paikuli inscription (NPi).

By the sixth century few regions of the Sasanian Empire remained under the authority of regional “kings.” The hodgepodge collection of local kingdoms of the Arsacids was largely supplanted, first with Sasanian royal princes, but finally by a system of royally appointed governors, *marzpanan* (“border lords”) and *sharaban* (“satraps”), alongside financial auditors, *hamarkaran* (Gignoux 1984b; Gyselen 1989; Khurshudian 1998: 58–72, 124–32). While these officials were often drawn from among traditional aristocracies, they were, at least theoretically, not hereditary and were open to appointments of non-Iranian (Persian or Parthian) office-holders. As royal appointees with limited powers, the *marzpanan* and *sharaban* were considerably less likely to revolt than their princely Sasanian predecessors, especially under the supervision of the *hamarkaran*. The activities of late Sasanian princes and other, non-royal, members of the dynasty are less clear from the sources, although the decline of princely independence must have significantly transformed the character of the court of the King of Kings in the last two centuries of Sasanian rule.

The Sasanians also sought to secure their access to military power independently of the Parthian *vuzurgan*.¹⁸ Thus, from at least the fourth century onward, the Sasanians came to employ large numbers of auxiliary troops to expand their offensive capabilities and free themselves from this dependence. Roman sources indicate that the Sasanians recruited extensively from frontier peoples, such as Armenians, Iberians, Chionites, Hephthalites, Gelani, Albani, Sakas, and Arabs.¹⁹ Recently subjugated peoples, or those peoples bound by treaties to the Sasanian King of Kings, were particularly exploited in royal service. Notably, though, contingents drawn from these newly allied peoples served on frontiers distant from their homelands, with their loyalties secured by the taking of hostages, or wives, to the Sasanian court. While these auxiliaries made the Sasanian armies more flexible than a force entirely levied from and by Parthian aristocrats, they were tested by pressures

on the northern and eastern frontiers from 395 onward by various Hunnic and Turkic tribal groups.

The Caucasus and the Aramaean regions of the Sasanian Empire seem to have played atypical roles in the Sasanian military system, although this may reflect the prominence of Armenian and Aramaic sources. Judging from Armenian histories, heavy cavalry levied from the Caucasian aristocracies saw extensive service on the northeastern frontiers of the empire (Elishe 18–21; Sebeos 96–104). However, the Armenian elites were culturally part of the Iranian world, some families even bound by ties of blood to the Parthian “Great Families” (Garsoïan 1976, 1982, 1996; Russell 1987). Moreover, from the fourth century onward, a significant proportion of the aristocratic population of Armenia had converted to Christianity. For these reasons, and their location on the contested northern frontier with the Roman Empire, Armenia and its soldiers were both a vital and problematic element of Sasanian military power.

By contrast, the Aramaean population of Mesopotamia seems to have been largely demilitarized, except as defensive militias. This may perhaps be explained as the Sasanian classification of these populations as “subjects” rather than “free men.” The heavily Jewish and Christian character of the Aramaean populace only confirmed that they were a potentially untrustworthy “foreign” element. Yet the Aramaean populace was the central pillar of the Sasanian polity’s tax base, requiring “protection.” Indeed, Shapur II presented his attempt to double the tax levy on Christians as the Aramaean Christian “alternative” to military service (Goodblatt 1979b; Morony 1984a: 109).

Certainly the Sasanians proved eager to expand their overall tax base, both as a military measure and to enhance their position vis-à-vis the *vuzurgan*. Initially this was accomplished through their investment in royal properties, particularly those in Pars, Khuzestan, and Asorestan. From Ardashir I onward, Sasanian kings planned new urban foundations as royal administrative centers. Royal lands were further enhanced by the construction of dams, canals, and irrigation works, and linked together with new roadways and bridges (Wenke 1975–6; Howard-Johnston 1995: 198–221). The Sasanians also established royal workshops associated with the royal city Veh-Antiyok-Shapur (called Beth Lafat by Aramaeans). All of these improvements would, in theory, have enhanced the revenue available to the Sasanian family, compensating for their dependence on the goodwill of the *vuzurgan*. Reflecting this calculation, royal investment appears to have at least partially bypassed the Iranian plateau in favor of the Aramaean regions of the empire or, in the sixth century, “virgin” territories like the Azerbaijan and Gorgan plains (see below).

Other physical improvements were more directly correlated with Sasanian military activities. In distinct contrast to the Mediterranean-centered Roman Empire, most of the long-distance communication through the Sasanian dominions was accomplished by road: on foot or horseback. The two primary land routes through the Sasanian empire both originated in Asorestan, with the northerly itinerary running into Central Asia via Media, and Aparshahr, and the southern

path taking in Messene, Khuzestan, and Pars. These roads formed the primary means of moving Sasanian armies from the Iranian highlands into Central Asia or the Roman frontier. This dependence on land travel was a great weakness of the Sasanian military system. Road networks, no matter how sophisticated, simply did not provide the level of connectivity enjoyed by the Mediterranean-centered Roman state. Months of travel by land might be reduced to weeks or days of sea travel by favorable winds and currents. On this account, the Sasanians generally found armies more difficult to assemble and supply over the long term than their enemies in the Eastern Roman Empire.

Literary sources and inscriptions describe the Sasanians founding cities and temples as staging points for campaigns and as places to commemorate victories. The great fire temple and palace complex Adur Gushnasp, built in the fifth century CE and dedicated to the Sasanian soldiery, served as an assembly point for soldiers moving between east and west in the Sasanian realm (Boyce 1985a; Huff 1978). Booty taken in military campaigns funded many of these construction projects, while the long-standing ancient Near Eastern precedent of deportation of foreign populations played a significant role in Sasanian urbanization (Lieu 1986; Kettenhofen 1996b; Morony 2004b). The Sasanian cities of Veh-Antiyok-Shapur in Khuzestan and Veh-Antiyok in Asorestan were each constructed as “better Antiochs” for Roman captives taken in the sacks of the original Roman city (260 and 540). Indeed, Procopius described Khusro’s new city as a mirror image of a Roman city, complete with baths and other trappings of Greco-Roman urbanization (Procop. *Bell. Pers.* 2.14.1–4). Archaeological and literary evidence also suggests that Roman deportees and their descendants contributed significantly to the construction of infrastructure and the development of royal artistic workshops (Girshman 1971: 11; Harper 1981: 17–18; Kettenhofen 1996b). Other resettlements introduced Persian military families to Arbayestan, Hedayab, Garmakan, and Asorestan, and Indian farmers to Mayshan and Asorestan, among others (Morony 1976, 1984a: 181–90, 265–74; Payne 2009).

As a part of this development of infrastructure, Sasanian kings became ever more invested, both literally and figuratively, in the lands of the Tigris-Euphrates floodplains. Although Peter Brown has presented this reorientation as a long, and rather ignominious retreat from the East (1971: 167–8), it also reflects the exigencies of Sasanian relations with the *vuzurgan*.²⁰ Royal cities like Seleucia-Ctesiphon proved effective centers for the extraction of the massive agricultural and commercial wealth of what Robert Adams (1981) termed the “Heartland of Cities.” These lowlands were wealthy, urbanized, and could be taxed without eliciting the intractable and violent resistance of the *vuzurgan* of the Iranian plateau.

The growing importance of the lowlands to the Sasanian monarchy may be seen in the gradual shift in the primary residences of the kings from Pars to Asorestan/Babylonia. Although the Sasanian kings were always itinerant, Ardashir I and Shapur I primarily resided in Pars, while their successors from Bahram I to Peroz established themselves in Khuzestan, at Veh-Antiyok-Shapur, conveniently near

the interface between Iranian plateau and Aramaean plains. By the sixth and seventh centuries, Sasanian kings came to reside at Seleucia-Ctesiphon, the great central metropolis of the Tigris-Euphrates floodplain, with additional palaces in the foothills of the Zagros. The massive arched audience hall of Ctesiphon, the Taq-i Kisra, and a number of richly stuccoed aristocratic residences at the site appear to date from this era.²¹

Magians, Jews, and Christians: the Dynamics of Coexistence

In addition to investment in infrastructure and urbanization, effective royal exploitation of the lowlands necessitated a significant investment in bureaucratic centralization. Initially, the Sasanians relied most extensively on the Magian priesthood to supply literate administrators. These priests, themselves members of the Iranian aristocracies, remained true to their own agendas: meddling with Babylonian Jews' free practice of their religion, inspiring their king to execute the "heretical" prophet Mani and, in the words of the *Ohrmazd-Magupat* Kirdir, smiting non-Magians and "smashing the idols and abodes of the demons and making them into thrones and seats of the gods" (KKZ 11).²² Indeed, an account in the *Babylonian Talmud* (Yevamot 63b; Neusner 1966) notes with dismay the proliferation of intrusive Magian priests in Babylonia following the overthrow of the Parthians, although the rabbis were relieved to find this interference would be mitigated through bribery.

Ultimately, Magian priests were not the ideal representatives of the Sasanian monarchy, particularly in the rich lowlands, where Iranian Magians were few and far between. Sasanian use of priestly administrators in the Tigris-Euphrates floodplains was further complicated by the inexorable spread of Christianity from its early eastern centers in Adiabene and Khuzestan. Many of the same conditions that fostered the spread of the Christian faith in the Roman world were mirrored in Sasanian Mesopotamia, with its religious pluralism, dense Jewish population, and highly interconnected urban communities. The Sasanian kings, for all their historical connections with Magianism, seem to have displayed little interest in suppressing Christian worship until Roman emperors asserted their hegemony over Christians everywhere (Brock 1982; Barnes 1985). This claim, first made by Constantine I, combined with the military conflicts between Rome and Iran in the 340s, had immediate repercussions in Shapur II's so-called "Great Massacre" of Christian leaders at Beth Lafat and subsequent martyrdoms (Wiesehöfer 1993; Burgess 1999).

Ultimately, persecution proved a failure as royal policy, just as in the Roman world. The thirty years of intermittent persecution under Shapur II, related in such lurid detail by the Syriac and Greek *Acts of the Persian Martyrs*,²³ seem to have presented no permanent disruption to the expansion and organization of the

Christian Church in the east. Indeed, as was the case in the Roman west, the very public intransigence of the martyrs proved a compelling advertisement for the truth claims of Christian missionaries.

Thus, while generalized royal persecution of Christians played a short, but memorable, role in Sasanian–Christian relations, it seems not to have outlived Shapur II. Although subsequently Sasanian authorities responded with ferocity to Iranian and Armenian “apostasy” to Christianity, and the Magian priesthood remained hostile to non-Magians, the general tone of Sasanian–Christian relations evolved into one of (occasionally grudging) tolerance and sociopolitical integration of Christian minority communities.

Arguably, collaboration was a somewhat more “natural” approach for the Sasanian kings. As noted above, they had long ceded important bureaucratic and judicial roles to Magian priests. Further, there is some contested evidence for the existence of a similar *modus vivendi* established between the Sasanian kings and representatives of the Jewish communities of Babylonia.²⁴ Possibly continuing Arsacid-era precedents, under the Sasanians, rabbis, perhaps under the leadership of the Jewish *resh galutha* (“head of the exile”), supported the king, policed their own affairs, and removed some of their less “Magian-friendly” ritual practices from the public eye.²⁵ Indeed, Aramaic and Middle Persian writings refer to Yazdgard I’s marriage to the daughter of the *resh galutha*, suggesting that king regarded the Babylonian Jews equivalent to other peoples worthy of a marital alliance (*Shahrestaniha-i Eranshahr* 10, 47). Even the arch-persecutor of Christians, Shapur II, regarded Shemon, the bishop of Kokhe (Seleucia-Ctesiphon), as a valid representative of his empire’s Christian community (Morony 1984a: 109). According to the *Acta* of Simon bar Sabbae, Shapur expected the bishop to collect additional tribute from Christians for the king’s wars against Rome, although the author(s) of the *Acta* were unsurprisingly more concerned with Shemon’s execution for his refusal to cooperate with his king (Kmosko 1907).

In the early fifth century, the king Yazdgard I took active steps to normalize relations between the Sasanian monarchy and the leaders of his polity’s Christian minorities.²⁶ Like the Roman Emperor Constantine in the previous century, Yazdgard officially ended the persecution of Christians, allowed them to practice their religion in public, circulate through the empire as they wished, rebuild or build new churches, and hold synods at royal expense (*Synodicon Orientale* 18; McDonough 2008b). Through the windows of Christian canon law, histories, and hagiographies it is evident that Yazdgard and his successors established a variety of working principles between the monarchy and Christian leaders.²⁷ The Sasanian kings offered support for the judicial rulings of bishops over all Christians (including those deemed “heretics” by those bishops), the establishment of a stable, centralized hierarchy within the “official” Sasanian Church (ultimately called the “Church of the East”), and, particularly in the sixth and seventh centuries, financial support for Christian churches and monastic foundations (Villagomez 1998b: 24–67). In return, Yazdgard and his successors expected the bishops to supply public, ritual displays of loyalty, maintain good order among the Christian communities, and

offer direct aid to the king and his representatives as advisors, ambassadors, spies, and administrators. More intrusively, Sasanian kings claimed the right of approval over holders of high offices in the Church.

These compromises guaranteed relative peace and stability for Christian subjects of the Sasanians and greatly extended the influence of bishops of the Church of the East, both among Christians and in the empire at large. However, toleration of Christians also threatened the traditional sociopolitical order of the empire.

This threat was most visible in the 451 revolt of Armenia.²⁸ The Armenian cavalry was a vital military contingent drawn from outside the ranks of the Parthian *vuzurgan*. However, the extensive Christianization of the military aristocracy of the region presented a significant problem for Sasanian kings and aristocrats who perceived a direct correlation between Magian worship and military victory, while linking Christianity with the Roman enemies of Iran. While Aramaeans, outside of traditional networks of military recruitment, were acceptable Christian subjects, for the culturally Iranian and militarily active Armenians to adopt Christianity proved to be beyond the bounds of toleration for some Sasanian officials and for the king Yazdgard II. Following an attempt by the king forcibly to reimpose Magianism on Christian aristocrats in the Caucasus, Armenia rose in revolt (McDonough 2006).

Although Yazdgard II suppressed the revolt of Armenia, and Christian Armenian soldiers would serve again in the Sasanian armies of the sixth and seventh centuries, the disruption of Sasanian military recruitment due to the 451 revolt in the Caucasus weakened Sasanian forces in the east. Sasanian armies suffered a series of military reverses and became increasingly insistent in demanding Roman subsidies to provide for “mutual defense” (ps.-Joshua Stylites *Chron.* 1.242–43; Rubin 1986). The total collapse of the Sasanian northern frontier following the rout of king Peroz’s expedition against the Hephthalite Huns (484) appears to have sealed the fate of the traditional systems of Sasanian military and social organization (ps.-Joshua Stylites *Chron.* 1.242–44; Procop. *De bell. Pers.* 1.3; Greatrex 1998: 40–52).

The Final Centuries of Sasanian Rule

The successors of Yazdgard and Peroz were forced to cope with the empowerment of Christian elites, the continuing influence of the *vuzurgan*, and this military collapse. These successors paid humiliating tributes to the Hephthalites, who came to play an essential role in the internal politics of the era, restoring their protégé, the deposed king Kavad, to the throne in 498 (ps.-Joshua Stylites *Chron.* 1.250–52; Procopius *De bell. Pers.* 1.6). Kavad’s deposition was rooted in his efforts to spread the Zaradushti heresy, particularly its injunction that women should be shared in common (Crone 1994). While the rationale for this is difficult to see, Kavad’s actions may have been intended to disrupt the military, economic, and political power of the *vuzurgan* of Iran. Although Kavad appears to have adopted a more conciliatory approach to the *vuzurgan* following his restoration, a variety

of social disorders continued to undermine the power of the traditional aristocracies, most notably the “communist” heresy of Mazdak (typically associated with the Zardushtakan in the sources).²⁹ Nevertheless, the power of the Parthian *vuzurgan* was hardly broken by these events (Rubin 2004).

Following these disruptions, Kavad and his son Khusro I Anoshirvan (“Of the immortal soul”) undertook a general survey of the empire’s economic resources and revised taxation systems to strengthen the empire’s fiscal position. Scholars such as James Howard-Johnston (1995) and Ze’ev Rubin (1995), among others, have debated the relative value of Kavad and Khusro’s tax reforms in the expansion of the Sasanian economy. Nonetheless, the era saw the apex of the Sasanian investment in defensive works and agricultural development noted above. Indeed, major settlement and irrigation projects, coupled with the completion of linear fortifications at Derbend (in modern Daghestan) as well as on the Arran (modern Azerbaijan) and Gorgan plains opened up these new areas to Sasanian economic exploitation.³⁰ In a related development, the sixth- and seventh-century Sasanian kings also seem to have made better efforts to exploit long-distance trade through their territories (Whitehouse and Williamson 1973; Daryaei 2003; De la Vaissière 2005: 228–32). Contemporary Roman efforts to establish a native silk industry probably represent a response to Sasanian economic activities, while the Sasanian occupation of Yemen in the 570s may be the culmination of efforts by Khusro I to control and exploit long-distance trade to the dynasty’s financial advantage. Moreover, from this period onward Sasanian mints produced far greater numbers of silver *drachms*, culminating in the truly massive production under Khusro’s grandson, Khusro II Aparvez (Sears 1999). This production suggests a significant expansion of the Sasanian monetary economy in the sixth century, regulated to some degree by the consistent use of dates, and mint- and control-marks on the coinage. The issuance of official, standardized administrative seals, apparently beginning under Kavad and Khusro I, may also be linked to these developments.³¹

In related reforms, Kavad, Khusro, and their successors attempted to revise systems of military recruitment and provisioning in order to replace their traditional reliance on cavalry led by the Parthian *vuzurgan*. On some level these kings simply expanded their use of allied or mercenary forces, such as the Hephthalites, Arabs, and Daylamites. However, Khusro appears also to have enrolled a new lesser military aristocracy (the *diganan*), tied to state land grants, in order to replace traditional systems of recruiting that relied on the *vuzurgan* (Zakeri 1995: 22–31; Tafazzoli 1996; Rubin 2000: 654–9). Indeed, al-Tha’alibi (*Ghurar* 6) indicates that Khusro advised his successors to protect the *diganan* so that they would protect the monarchy. These *diganan* also served as tax collectors for the monarchy, perhaps improving the efficiency of collection at the local level (Christensen 1944: 112–13; Howard-Johnston 1995: 228–9; Rubin 1995: 279–97). The development of a Sasanian version of “chivalry,” codified in this period (and recently discussed by Zakeri 1995: 57–69), may also be related to this establishment of the *diganan*.

Interestingly, a number of texts promoting a “traditional” division of Iranian society between farmers, priests, and warriors circulated in this era, either as a part of this military reorganization or in direct response to it (Tafazzoli 2000). The new military system was administered by four royally appointed generals (*Eran-spahbedan*) who were detailed to the “sides” of the empire and ranked above the *marzpanan* of the frontier provinces. The work of Rika Gyselen (2001) has documented elaborate seals for several of these *Eran-spahbedan* that offer information on the title-holders and their relationship to the Sasanian kings (notably Khusro I and Hormizd IV). Significantly, many of these generals were representatives of the Parthian *vuzurgan*, suggesting the persistence of the power of these magnates even through this period of reconstruction (Gyselen 2001, 2007; Pourshariati 2008: 94–101). The reconstituted Sasanian military proved successful against the Roman Empire of Justinian I, sacking Antioch in 540, expelling the Axumites from Yemen in the 570s, and, under the Parthian general Bahram Cobin, defeating both the Hephthalites and the newly arrived Turkish khanate in the late 580s.

Alongside this development of new military aristocracies, royal toleration of non-Magians served to extend networks of royal patronage, making rabbis and bishops beholden to, and dependent on, the king for their power and position. In much the same way that the Sasanian kings sought both to elevate and subordinate the Iranian Magian aristocracies through the opening of bureaucratic offices to Magian priests and aristocrats, similar (albeit more limited) opportunities opened for ambitious Jewish and Christian leaders. By the sixth century, the Sasanian kings had clearly come to favor a quasi-official role for the leaders of the “Nestorian” Church of the East.

The Sasanian kings exercised considerable say in the appointment of specific Christian leaders and in the elaboration of ecclesiastical institutions. Notably, Yazdgard I and his successors consistently supported the centralization of the Church of the East around the bishops of the royal city of Seleucia-Ctesiphon – by then an important royal city and a regular winter residence of the Sasanian Kings (Macomber 1968; Baum and Winkler 2003: 14–17). Moreover, Sasanian kings sought, with mixed results, to encourage the dissemination of Christian doctrines compatible with their royal ideology and personal Magian faith. Perhaps in sympathy, the bishops assembled at synods of the Church of the East ruled in favor of clerical marriage and opposed rigorous forms of asceticism (Erhart 2001). These rulings were both in areas where Magians believed Christian practices to be crypto-Manichaean denials of the goodness of creation. Nevertheless, Christian monasticism practiced under the “official” Church of the East or within growing Miaphysite communities (called “Monophysites” by hostile outsiders) remained a central part of religious expression in Sasanian Iran (Villagomez 1998b).

Despite theological incompatibilities with the faith of their rulers, in the sixth and seventh centuries the Christian priesthood and monastic orders became a Sasanian aristocracy in their own right, developing alongside the new Iranian service aristocracy of the *diganan* (McDonough 2008a). Christian physicians (often acting as astrologers) and officials proliferated at court in the final century

of Sasanian rule. Indeed, even some Iranians regarded the Church as a more secure avenue for their ambitions than traditional martial enterprises. A variety of Syriac martyr acts and monastic histories chronicle the conversion of Magian aristocrats to Christianity in the sixth and seventh centuries, including members of the *vuzurgan* (Morony 1984a: 298–300). Investment in monastic foundations proved a means of entrenching the wealth and local power of aristocratic families (Pigulevskaja 1963: 184–6; Morony 1981, 1984b: 144; Villagomez 1998b: 122–6). As a final sign and symptom of the “mainstreaming” of several of the Sasanian Christian communities, the late Sasanian kings made offerings to Christian shrines while both Khusro I and, more famously, Khusro II took Christian wives (Fowden 1999: 133–41; Baum 2004). The seventh-century Armenian historian Sebeos (70) even reports an apocryphal deathbed conversion of Khusro I to Christianity, suggesting the climate of Christian triumphalism in the late Sasanian era.

Thus, by the sixth century, under the rule of Kavad and Khusro I, the old institutions of client kingship and household rule had been replaced by an increasingly professional administration drawn from the elites of the Iranian empire: the old *vuzurgan*-Magian priests and aristocrats, the new *diganan*, and the elites of recognized Jewish and Christian communities. Indeed, in response to a petition by Magian priests seeking to persecute his Christian and Jewish subjects, the king Hormizd IV reputedly returned the document with the statement: “Just as our royal throne cannot stand on its two front legs without the two back ones, our kingdom cannot stand or endure firmly if we cause the Christians and the adherents of other faiths, who differ in belief from ourselves, to become hostile to us” (al-Tabari *Ta’rikh* 1.991; Bosworth 1999: 298).

Nevertheless, in spite of the surface atmosphere of religious tolerance and unity among the peoples of *Eranshahr*, this period is also notable as a time in which communities defined by religious confession defined themselves in ever stricter, oppositional terms (Morony 1984a: 277–9). Magians, Christians, and Jews alike sought to codify their scripture and the “laws” of their sages. In these laws were strict penalties for mixing with other groups through marriage or conversion, which both alienated property and threatened to remove childbearing women from the community (Erhart 2001). Yet, at least in Babylonia, the physical evidence of magical “incantation bowls” suggests that Jews, Christians, and Magians continued to live alongside each other and share a common regional culture (Morony 2003). Similarly, a resurgence of Christian martyrological writing lionized resistance to temporal power and false belief at the same time as Christian officials were cooperating with Sasanian kings and officials (Walker 2006). Finally, this era of transformation and anxiety saw the vast expansion of apocalyptic expectation across all the religious communities of the Sasanian world (Kippenberg 1978; Daryaei 1998; Villagomez 1998a). As it turns out, there was considerable reason for apprehension, although it would be the Sasanian dynasty that would face its own apocalypse, while the religious communities and institutions it had nurtured would persevere.

The Triumph and Twilight of the Sasanians

All of these sociopolitical trends came to a head in the tumultuous reign of Khusro II (590, 591–628), the last effective monarch of the Sasanian dynasty. The beginning of his reign saw Khusro's deposition by the charismatic and successful warlord, Bahram Chobin, scion of the Mehran family of the *vuzurgan* (Frendo 1997; Pourshariati 2008: 122–30). Playing upon Magian apocalyptic beliefs, Bahram took the Iranian throne claiming the restoration of the Parthian Arsacids and the overthrow of the Sasanian “usurpers” (Czeglédy 1958; Pourshariati 2008: 397–414). Although later aristocratic authors romanticized Bahram's revolt in such works as the *Bahram Chobin-nama*, he seems to have been incapable of uniting the Iranian aristocracies behind his kingship, facing resistance from his “equals” among the *vuzurgan* and those administrative officials closely associated with the Sasanian polity. While Bahram continued Sasanian policies of religious tolerance, ultimately Christian forces from Rome and Armenia restored Khusro to power (Widengren 1961: 146–7). While the failures of Bahram's revolt, and of the subsequent rising of the noble Bistam, represent the ultimate triumphs of Sasanian *realpolitik* over the traditionalism of the *vuzurgan*, they also revealed serious weaknesses in Sasanian authority (Pourshariati 2008: 131–40). In the decades to come, Khusro II, now calling himself *Aparvez* (“victorious”) and the savior of Iran, brought his empire to its greatest triumphs and to ruinous defeat.

Using the murder of his benefactor, the Roman Emperor Maurice, as a pretext, and taking advantage of the distractions of civil conflict and invasions in the Roman north and west, Khusro launched an invasion of the Roman east in the first decade of the seventh century. By the 610s, these invasions had borne fruit with the fall of Jerusalem in 614 and the Sasanian capture of Egypt in 618–20. Although the precise mechanics of these Sasanian victories are somewhat obscure, they probably had their roots in the administrative changes of the mid-sixth century. However, Khusro placed his military in the hands of generals like the Armenian Smbat Bagratuni and the Parthian Shahrvaraz, a situation far removed from the direct participation of earlier, martial Sasanian kings. Ironically, generals who led Khusro's armies to victory were little different in their power and personal ambition from the rebel warlord Bahram Chobin. Nonetheless, by 619 Khusro seriously appeared to have restored the old Persian empire of the Achaemenids on a permanent basis. Khusro also empowered local religious leaders in the conquered territories, especially anti-Chalcedonian Miaphysites, while investing some of the spoils of conquest in the endowment of Christian institutions throughout his dominions (Morony 1984a: 375–8; Greatrex 2003).

In the end, it was the perpetual advantage of Rome, its command of the sea, coupled with Khusro's own empowerment of aristocratic warlords, that brought the Sasanian king's ambitions to a halt. Thanks to the Roman navy, Persian forces were unable to cross the Bosphorus to besiege Constantinople (626), while the Emperor Heraclius took full advantage of Roman naval mobility to invade Sasanian

territories through the south Caucasus (Howard-Johnston 2004). After a series of victories and the destruction of Sasanian infrastructure, Heraclius negotiated a separate peace with the disgraced warlord Shahrvaraz, and Khusro II was deposed for a second, and final, time (Howard-Johnston 2004). The overstretched Persian armies evacuated the occupied Roman territories.

Although their rule survived Khusro's hubris, his disastrous defeat ruinously diminished the prestige of the Sasanian family, leading to several years of civil conflict among members of the Sasanian family, their generals, and the Parthian aristocracy (Pourshariati 2008: 161–285). Roman attacks on Sasanian infrastructure (and Sasanian defensive efforts) crippled Sasanian agricultural production and tax collection. Khusro's wars had further alienated the *vuzurgan* and also disrupted Sasanian relations with their Arab and Central Asian clients. Khusro's successor, Yazdgard III (632–51), was little prepared for the shattering Arab invasions that first stole away the Mesopotamian lowlands (636) and then, after the battle of Nihavand (642), opened the previously impregnable Iranian plateau to Arab conquerors.

In 651, Yazdgard III, the last Sasanian King of Kings, died humbly in Merv, the most remote central Asian outpost of his kingdom. While his sons, and some supporters of his regime lived on, exiled in Tang China, the four-century rule of the Sasanian family came to an end. However, just as the institutions of the Roman West lived on in a variety of successor polities there, the institutional structures of Sasanian Iran were eagerly adopted by its conquerors. The principles and ideologies of Sasanian administration, which had grudgingly grown to accommodate and integrate ethnic, cultural, and religious pluralism, provided a model of rule for generations of future "Kings of Kings." Out of the crucible of Sasanian *Eranshahr* came the foundations of personal and collective identity that would define the world of the medieval Near East.

Abbreviations

<i>CHI</i> III	Yarshater 1983a.
<i>EI</i> ²	Bearman et al. 1960.
<i>EIr</i>	Yarshater 1982–.
Elishe	Ter-Minasean 1957. Thomson 1982 (trans.).
ps.-Joshua Stylites <i>Chron.</i>	Chabot 1927. Trombley and Watt 2000 (trans.).
KKZ	Inscription of Kirdir at the Ka'ba-i Zardusht: Gignoux 1991.
Łazar P'arpec'i	Ter Mkrtch'ean and Malkhasean 1904. Thomson 1991 (trans.).
NPi	Inscription of Narseh at Paikuli: Humbach and Skjærvø 1978–83.
Sebeos	Abgaryan 1979. Thomson and Howard-Johnston 1999 (trans.).

ShKZ	Inscription of Shapur I at the Ka'ba-i Zardusht: Huyse 1999.
<i>Shahrestaniha-i Eranshahr</i>	Daryae 2002.
<i>Synodicon Orientale</i>	Chabot 1902.
al-Tabari <i>Ta'rikh</i>	<i>Ta'rikh al-rusul wa-al-muluk</i> : de Goeje 1879–1901. Nöldeke 1879 (trans.); Bosworth 1999 (trans.).
al-Tha'alibi, <i>Ghurur</i>	<i>Al-ghuruar fi siyar al-muluk</i> : Zotenberg 1900.

Notes

- 1 For abbreviations of works not commonly cited in journals of Ancient History and Classics, see the beginning of the bibliography. My thanks to the William Paterson University of New Jersey and the Institute for the Study of the Ancient World for their support of the writing of this chapter, and to friends and colleagues for their many helpful suggestions on drafts of the paper.
- 2 For general surveys of Sasanian Iran and its institutions see: Nöldeke 1879; Christensen 1944; Morony 1997; Frye 1984a, 1984b; Wiesehöfer 1996; Rubin 2000; Dignas and Winter 2007; Howard-Johnston 2008.
- 3 The limitations of space here do not permit a full discussion of the complex historiographical problems inherent in the study of Sasanian Iran. Sasanian scholarship suffers from a limited and unevenly distributed archaeological corpus, a reliance on Sasanian-era objects lacking clear archaeological context, and a literary source-base scattered across at least ten major languages and cultural traditions (including Middle Persian, Armenian, Rabbinic Aramaic, Syriac, Bactrian, Sogdian, Greek, Latin, Arabic, New Persian), which are embedded in texts and manuscripts that are often unnervingly “modern” in provenance. The international politics of the early twenty-first century and the natural balkanization of the study of the Sasanians along methodological or philological lines present major, but not insurmountable, roadblocks to future research. Articles by Howard-Johnston (1995: 169–80) and Rubin (1995) suggest two quite different approaches to literary sources, particularly tenth-century writings in Arabic. Nonetheless, nuanced analyses of inscriptions, coins, seals, bullae, and other material productions of the Sasanian era (e.g., metal luxury items, incantation bowls, etc.) have yielded significant results in recent years (Harper 1981; Shaked 1997; Gyselen 1989, 2001, 2007; Morony 2003). These materials have, at times, confirmed problematic literary accounts, allowed us to reconstruct the principles of Sasanian governance, and opened the door to the writing of a real “social history” of the Sasanian world.
- 4 For Sasanian administrative geography see: Morony 1982; Brunner 1983; and, based on inscriptions and seals, Gyselen 1989. See also the extensive evidence collected by Fiey 1979, 1993 on Christian ecclesiastical geography. A geographical survey of the lands of Sasanian Iran, with particular emphasis on Sasanian-era agricultural and urban development may be found in Howard-Johnston (1995: 198–211). Various volumes of the *Tübinger Atlas des Vorderen Orients (TAVO)* are also helpful for examining hydrology and vegetation patterns in the region, although the scope of the series does not, unfortunately, extend to the lands of the former Soviet Union.

- 5 Adams (1965, 1972, 1981) has conducted several large-scale surveys of these regions in modern Iraq. Potts 1999 presents a useful summary of archaeological sites in Khuzestan, while Wenke 1975–6 details survey work there specifically relevant to the Parthian and Sasanian periods. See also Young et al. 1987 for a general survey of archaeology in the territories ruled by Iranian empires. Wenke and Pyne 1990 discusses some of the limitations of archaeological survey work.
- 6 Adams 1965, 1972, 1981; Wenke 1975–6; Christensen 1993; Howard-Johnston 1995: 198–203.
- 7 In general, these regions have seen less systematic archaeological survey work than the lowlands of Mesopotamia and Khuzestan. Again, see Young et al. 1987.
- 8 Pigulevskaja 1963: 17–38; Lukonin 1983; Brunner 1983; Morony 1991a, 1994, 2004a.
- 9 Gafni 2002; Morony 2003; Walker 2006; Kalmin 2006.
- 10 Hinz 1971; Henrichs 1975; Mackenzie 1979–80; Gardner and Lieu 2004: 3–8.
- 11 For Roman–Sasanian relations, see: Lee 1993; Greatrex 1998; Rubin 2000; Dodgeon and Lieu 2000; Greatrex and Lieu 2002; Dignas and Winter 2007.
- 12 Surveys of Parthian history: Chaumont 1971–84; Schippmann 1980; Bivar 1983; Wolski 1993; Wiesehöfer 1996: 115–49.
- 13 Bivar 1983; Lukonin 1983; Wolski 1993; Wiesehöfer 1996: 130–43.
- 14 al-Tabari *Ta'rikh*: 1.814; Nöldeke 1879: 17; Chaumont 1958; Boyce 1985b; Azarnoush 1987.
- 15 Alam 2008; Daryaei 2008; Harper 2008; Huff 2008.
- 16 Sites of early Sasanian sculptures and inscriptions include Firuzabad, Naqsh-e Rostam (site of the Ka'ba-i Zardusht), Naqsh-e Rostam, Bishapur, Barm-e Dilak, Paikuli, and Taq-e Bistan. See Vanden Berghe and Smekens 1984; Back 1978, along with studies of individual monuments in volumes of *Iranische Denkmäler*.
- 17 Altheim and Stiehl 1954; Widengren 1976; Wolski 1981; Frye 1987; Zakeri 1995: 13–22.
- 18 For surveys of the Sasanian military, see Shahbazi 1987; Zakeri 1995: 13–94; Greatrex 1998: 52–9.
- 19 Amm. Marc. 19.2; ps.-Joshua Stylites *Chron.* 1.277–78; Procop. *De bello Gothico* 4.14.5–7, 9; Theophylact Simocates 4.3.1, 4.4.17.
- 20 Note, however, that new archaeological and literary evidence from the northern and eastern fringes of Sasanian Iran may lead to a reevaluation of that region's role in Sasanian ambitions at various points during the Sasanian era. See de la Vaissière 2005; Sims-Williams 2008.
- 21 Reuther 1930; Kühnel and Wachsmut 1933; Fiey 1967; Invernizzi 1976; Kröger 1982.
- 22 Henning 1942; Hinz 1971; Russell 1990; Huyse 1998; Jullien and Jullien 2002; Gafni 2002: 236–7.
- 23 Devos 1966; Wiessner 1967; Van Rompay 1995; Rist 1996.
- 24 On the Jewish communities of Babylonia, see Widengren 1961; Neusner 1983; Gafni 2002; Kalmin 2006.
- 25 *Babylonian Talmud*: Yevamot 63b; Shabbat 45b; Gittin 16b–17a; Sanhedrin 74b; Beer 1976; Brody 1990.
- 26 Surveys of the history of the Church of the East: Labourt 1904; McCullough 1982; Widengren 1984; Baum and Winkler 2003.
- 27 Brock 1982; Morony 1984a: 337; Erhart 2001; McDonough 2008a.

- 28 For the history of Armenia in the Sasanian period, see Adontz 1970; the chapters by Nina Garsoïan in Hovannisian 1997; Thomson and Howard-Johnston 1999. For the development of the Armenian Church, see Garsoïan 1999.
- 29 Christensen 1925, 1944: 357–8; Klima 1957, 1977; Gaube 1982; Yarshater 1983b; Tafazzoli 1984; Crone 1991, 1994.
- 30 Kettenhofen 1996a; Nokandeh et al. 2006; Alizadeh and Ur 2007; Hoffman 2007.
- 31 Frye 1973; Gignoux and Gyselen 1978, 1982, 1987; Gyselen 1989, 2000, 2002, 2007.

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